Abstract: The spread of information and communication technologies into publishing is generally seen as a boon - to authors, readers and a number of intermediaries such as libraries. Like many of the technologies associated with the "Knowledge society", publishing technologies are often interpreted as part of a welcome process of democratization, allowing individual authors and organizations to publish reasonably high quality books of their own creation. This paper examines the value-added processes of publishing from the perspective of the Centre for Information Studies, Charles Sturt University - a small, niche librarianship publisher in Australia, with a strong record of book publishing and the beginnings of a presence in e-publishing. Based on the Centre’s experience, the paper suggests that the costs of publishing in a growing, competitive and global market make it increasingly difficult for publishers to continue adding value in what many have come to call a knowledge society.

Subject: small presses; specialist presses; value-added processes

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This paper examines the value-added processes of publishing from the perspective of a small Australian publisher, the Centre for Information Studies, Charles Sturt University. The Centre or CIS focuses on niche markets in library and information management, teacher librarianship and children’s literature. For over twenty years, it has had a strong record of book publishing, with around thirty books on its list and it is also beginning to develop in the field of e-publishing. The spread of information and communication technologies into publishing is generally seen as a boon to various stakeholders in the publishing industry, not least small publishers like the CIS, with access, for instance, to increasingly sophisticated desktop publishing software and workflow systems. Publishing technologies, like many of the technologies associated with the ‘Knowledge Society’, are often interpreted as part of a welcome process of democratization, allowing individual authors and organizations to become publishers. Moreover, the growing use of labels such as ‘knowledge society’ to characterize our current stage of socioeconomic development lends extra validation to those, like publishers, who help to spread knowledge, including the new knowledge created by our research institutions. My experience with the CIS over the past ten years, however, suggests that it is increasingly difficult for publishers to continue adding value in what many see as a knowledge society, largely because of the costs of publishing in a growing, competitive and global market.

My focus here is the value-added processes that characterize publishing, especially book publishing. The first thing I need to establish, however, is what I mean by the term because it is quite possible that not everyone reading this paper shares the same understanding. Second, I discuss the principal value-added processes associated with publishing for a small publisher like the CIS. Third, I try to address the financial challenges facing a small publisher like the CIS, struggling to make ends meet in a global economy. Finally, I comment specifically about the academic sector and in particular the move towards e-presses and electronic institutional repositories. Far from presenting a solution, I suggest, these only exacerbate the problem for small publishers.

First, what do I mean by value-added processes? That may be self-evident to many but I am conscious that in some sectors value adding may be seen as something added on top of core business. An IT vendor, for instance, may see post-sale consultancy as a value-added activity that can make money on top of the core business of systems analysis, design and implementation. In the field of library and information management, however, it would be fair to say that most regard value adding as core business. Years ago Robert Taylor of Syracuse University wrote a highly influential book called *Value-added Processes in Information Systems*, in which he discussed system development in terms of the user enhancements added by the system. His use of the term ‘value-added’ was not concerned with economic concepts such as wealth creation or exchange value, but with the question: ‘What characteristics or attributes are added to the data or information items being processed that make them more useful (i.e., valuable, beneficial) to users, clients, customers, than they were at the start of the process?’ (1986, p. 19). In document-based systems, for instance, the addition of metadata,
such as subject descriptors, enhances document retrievability and can be described therefore as a value-added process. This takes a somewhat different approach to that of Angus Phillips in a 2004 paper, published in this journal, in which he built on Michael Porter’s concept of the value chain, which tends to focus attention on financial values and what costs are acceptable to the players in the value chain. This is beyond the scope of the current paper, which focuses on the unique contribution that publishers like ourselves can make to knowledge transfer. This is not to deny Phillips’ point (2004, p. 241) that ‘By adding value to the text, through for example judicious editing and an attractive cover, publishers hope to sell more copies or charge a higher price.’ Certainly publishers operate in a commercial environment and exchange value is an issue for us, as for any other commercial publisher, but it is the values added that I want to explore. The specific value-added processes dealt with here are:

- marketing
- editing, including input from reviewers, and
- the various production and design processes, including printing.

I am consciously omitting some of the links in the publishing value chain such as sales and, in the case of print publishing, processes such as storage, order processing and distribution (Phillips 2004, p. 242). These are undoubtedly important contributions to knowledge transfer but, since I plan to tap into the experience of a small academic publisher such as the CIS, I believe it is worth concentrating on the key issues of book production.

Why list marketing first? In some fields marketing is regarded as a process that is added on after the core processes associated with editing and production of texts – another name for promotions. Here I am following one of our CIS authors, Lee Welch, in regarding marketing as something much broader than promotions – something she describes as ‘the process of identifying and meeting client needs’. As a publisher, I see marketing as part of the core business. It is the publisher’s role to read the market, spot market gaps and commission authors to write material that meets those gaps. As a small, niche publisher, the CIS, for instance, frequently sees gaps in the market, especially in terms of its domestic Australasian market. Here the role of series editors, those with editorial responsibility for our series, is particularly critical. In terms of a knowledge society, this reading of the market and commissioning of new work to meet market needs is a key value-added process.

This is not to downplay the promotional aspects of marketing. One of the strengths of a small publisher is its niche market. It comes to be known for specific types of publication, specific types of content (especially through its use of series) and particular standards of publication. That in itself constitutes a form of value-adding since the authority, or lack of authority, of a publisher is a significant guide to other players in the Knowledge Society, such as libraries in their selection processes – an indicator that is often missing in the more anarchic world of web publishing.
Second there is the high-level editorial input – what Diane Brown and Lee White (2006, p. 1) refer to as ‘the mediating role of the editor in the intervention, generation and delivery of content’. Here it is important to distinguish editing from the subset of editing activities known as copy editing. While the focus of the latter is presentation, the overall editor is concerned with much more. The use of the word ‘content’ is critical. Quoting a 1987 issues paper from the *Australian Bookseller & Publisher* called ‘The Business of Editing’ (www/case-editors.org/), Brown and White provide a list of qualities and skills required by editors that includes copy-editing and proofreading, but also encompasses ‘commissioning and manuscript assessment, structural editing and typing, an understanding of the book trade, economic and legal aspects of publishing, organisational and communication skills’ (2006, p. 2). One of the worrying trends noted in their paper is the tendency to reduce editing to copy-editing at the expense of the provision of input on the level of content. The concentration on copy-editing, they suggest, ‘has resulted in the removal of, or substantial reduction in, that critical editorial function of mediating’ (2006, p. 4).

One of the areas of editorial work in which publishers provide an important value-added process lies in the commissioning of reviews. Here I am referring not to the post-publication review, but to the process of inviting referees to review work prior to publication – in some cases prior to an author contract. This may not be essential in the general world of commercial publishing, where series editors may be able to make the required publishing decisions unaided, but in the sphere of scholarly publishing in which the CIS operates it is often important to seek external expertise. The value-added process is obvious here because the reviewers provide feedback, not only on the marketability of the work, but also on aspects of authenticity, content and presentation. This is not to suggest, by the way, that series editors do not play an equally critical role in this process. Does the use of reviewers, however, really add value? According to a paper published in 2000 by David Laband, which dealt specifically with the reviewing of articles in economics journals, the answer is ‘Yes’. This has also been the experience of the CIS, which has made good use of external expertise to assist authors in the further development of their text. In the academic sector, of course, there is additional value adding in the sense that the refereeing of published works provides validation to authors in terms of research outcomes and recognition by research funding bodies and academic institutions. Indeed, it is worth noting that the CIS is recognized by the Department of Education, Science and Training in Australia as a commercial publisher, which adds extra encouragement to academic writers to publish with it.

Third, there are the other (one hesitates to use the term) lower-level enhancements to the final text, which are of course well-known aspects of publishing: copy editing, which ensures the quality of the text, and the addition of extra text, such as an index, which enhances reader access. Finally, there are processes associated with the physical medium, such as:

- design and layout of the publication, which should add value by making the text clearer
• cover design, which, as pointed out earlier, may increase interest in the publication, thus enhancing access, and
• printing.

In a small publishing operation like the CIS most of the value-added processes mentioned here are outsourced. Moreover, with the exception of printing, we typically rely on people who do their CIS work at home, crammed into weeknights or weekends. Copy editing and design are often contracted to Educational Designers who work for the CIS’s parent institution, CSU, while indexers are typically freelancers who fit our work into their busy schedules. In a sense, we are seeing a return to cottage industries, something some see as a positive development in the Knowledge Society.

This reliance on external staff, whether employed elsewhere or self-employed, has advantages, in that we do not have to pay on-costs such as superannuation, payroll tax or (what in Australia is called) workers’ compensation, but the downside is that we have to try to organize workflows in such a way that our schedules coincide with theirs. Delays in one process can mean that those involved in a later process are no longer available and we are forced to shop around for a replacement at short notice. There are challenges in terms of quality assurance and not just workflow management. More important, the value-added processes outlined here are largely labour-intensive. We are accustomed to believing that ICTs can provide the means to add value for lower costs – something we need to do, given the competition generated in an increasingly global economy – but we appear to have reached a limit; what economists refer to as a law of diminishing returns. There are improvements to indexing software, to take one example, but in our experience they are merely tools and add value, real value, only in the hands of a qualified human indexer. As a book reviewer, I have been struck in recent years at the number of commercial publishers that appear to have problems tracking down suitably qualified indexers – or perhaps that should read “suitably qualified and affordable indexers”.

The CIS relies on a network of qualified people, such as copy editors, proofreaders and indexers, who are willing to work for it in their own time and at quite low rates of remuneration (a common observation in this industry). But how long can it rely on this goodwill? Even in a cottage industry, one has to pay rent on the cottage. As David Myers points out (McGinty 2002, p. 191), ‘The editorial process is hugely time-consuming and expensive’. Globalization may offer a solution of sorts. In recent years, the CIS has received regular offers from organizations in the Indian sub-continent to provide a variety of services, including copy-editing, type-setting and printing. Angus Phillips mentions the impact of the Internet in this context, with the greater ease of communication and the development of ‘a global market in design, typesetting and print’ (2004, p. 243). Certainly there may be opportunities in globalization but to date the CIS has been reluctant to outsource text-related processes to countries in which the first language is not English and the economics of offshore printing require print-runs that are generally beyond the needs of its niche market.
One might think that an academic publisher like the CIS would be well placed given the current focus in the academic sector on measuring research quantum and, indeed, the recognition of the CIS as a commercial publisher by DEST (mentioned earlier) makes it easier for those of its authors who wish to claim research quantum. We do have considerable worries, however, and not only for the standard reasons. Students, for instance, often Google information enquiries in preference to spending money on books – as many have noted, ease of use replaces quality. As universities and the research communities come to grips with the fact that the research papers they provided free of charge to journal publishers are sold back to academic institutions, typically as part of highly expensive packages, many tertiary institutions, especially in the academic library sector, develop and promote Institutional Repositories for the storage and retrieval of full-text research material, often in the form of pre-prints. The issues associated with such developments have been widely debated elsewhere. Here, my concern is the small publisher stuck between the large publishers, with their economies of scale, and the institutional repositories, based upon open access principles and standards.

I am currently on an institutional repository working party, for which an e-press is a desirable add-on to the open access repository – an ‘additional requirement’ in business terms. My concern is that many academic institutions are so hell-bent on getting their research out there on the Web that the value-added processes I have outlined will be of secondary importance. Those value-added processes that appear reasonably well accepted by universities tend to be of a technical nature, such as the addition of metadata by university libraries that will enhance retrieval of the institutional research material. Those value-added processes associated with small, niche publishers like ourselves will simply be too expensive. Our experience so far suggests that e-presses and e-repositories are not necessarily compatible and that the value added by the publishing industry may lose out to the sheer quantity that institutional repositories can pump out. From the perspective of the academic researcher, it may be enough, first, that their publications are readily available to the wider academic community and are, they hope, being cited, and, second, that they are receiving research performance points from their funding bodies and their employers. After all, very few academics go into scholarly publishing for the money, with the exception of those who succeed in popularising their research for a general readership (which in any case, some would argue, is not scholarly publishing).

Analysis of value-added processes can often assist organizations identify their strengths and weaknesses. Those I have identified, however, raise questions in the current context, for instance:

- Are they affordable?
- Can we dispense with any or all of them?
- Can the costs of these processes be passed on to other players?
- Can new technologies further streamline these labor-intensive processes?

The third question is one that does appear to have been addressed, with some authors being asked to typeset their own work for nothing or for a nominal fee –
although it is worth noting Phillips’ qualification (2004, p. 242’), ‘Authors with some degree of competence’ [italics added]. It is also worth noting David Prosser’s suggestion (2004) that small journal publishers might navigate the transition to open access by charging authors a publication fee, with the alternative of paying no fee provided they agree that their work be accessed by subscription only.

I suspect that in response to the first two questions, many would respond ‘These value-added processes will have to affordable and no, we can’t dispense with any of them’. I note, for instance, Bobby Graham’s point (2002, 144) about the provision of publishing services such as editing, design, typesetting, print brokering and distribution to authors. While opposed to vanity publishing, she speaks for many when she suggests ‘that there is room for the provision of more publishing services to writers. I would far rather see professionally published books enter the market, whether paid for by the publisher or author, than a proliferation of poorly produced titles without the benefit of professional advice’ [italics added]. In the same collection, Lois Laivins, Manager of the Digital Publishing Unit at James Cook University, Australia, is quoted as being critical of digital publishing and, in particular, the widespread use of desktop publishing software without adequate training: ‘Desktop publishing has ruined the professional aspects of publishing. Some of the stuff you see is unreadable … Getting it out there quick today drives a lot of publishing. The aesthetics are missing’ (McGinty 2002, p.189).

The aesthetics may well be missing but what are people willing to afford and what are they willing to tolerate? There is anecdotal evidence – so far, to the best of my knowledge, unsubstantiated by any serious research – that the Y-Generation is much more tolerant of poorly proofed, badly structured, misspelled text than previous generations. It remains to be established whether this is the case or simply the impressionistic observation of an older generation of English speakers, worried about the impact of SMS and other technological take-ups on the language. All publishers can do is to be guided by their markets. In the case of the CIS’s particular, niche market, we know that, were we to abandon the value-added processes for which we have fought hard for recognition, we would be hammered by the review journals and, one suspects, our market. On the other hand, we know that, with the growth in global markets and the ease of finding ‘something’ on the Internet, including the growing number of institutional repositories, our niche market is increasingly less easily persuaded to buy books.

References


